

## Snailbeach, The Hollies and Stiperstones 21/9/2023

Organisers: Sue and Steve Southam

Twenty-eight members gathered in Snailbeach village hall car park on a bright morning, and walked the short distance up the hill to the deserted buildings of the lead mine, through an area of spoil-heaps where harebells and wild carrot fringed the path. The mine dominates the village and was the starting point of the suggested walks, as well as a good lunch spot. Once a bustling, noisy, smoking hive of industry, the site is now gently submitting to the encroachment of the natural world. The country rock in the area is known as Mytton Flags, sedimentary deposits of gritstone and shale laid down some 450 million years ago.

Several short, low level walks were available but most opted to ascend the lane to the ridge, passing the old mine candle house and powder house to emerge by Lords Hill Baptist Chapel. This building dates from the 1830s when the Earl of Tankerville granted 3/4 acre for the purpose. As usual with these old buildings, the gravestones make interesting reading.

From here it was a steady ascent along the main footpath onto the quartzite Stiperstones ridge, which goes straight up the side of The Hollies nature reserve, a scattered grove of extraordinary holly trees, some of them three or four centuries old. Gnarled and wizened, and in many cases almost skeletal, their ability to sprout new shoots from such ancient and unlikely looking trunks seemed quite amazing, and some even had rowans growing from within them. During the 19th century, miners working in the Snailbeach lead mines lived up here in draughty squatters' cottages, keeping a few sheep and cattle to supplement their earnings. Holly leaves, rich in calories and nutrients, provided the perfect winter fodder, and protected the trees from being chopped up for firewood, bobbin-making, teapot lid knobs, or the handles of horse-whip handles, as apparently happened to so many holly groves. Regular lopping of holly branches for fodder actually invigorated the trees, prolonging their lives and shaping their characters, hence their longevity. It was interesting to note that the leaves above browsing height lacked prickles, a fascinating adaptability by hollies which has been recognised for some time. From here, we rejoiced in the good weather, which afforded wonderfully extensive views of Pontesford Hill, the Wrekin, the Shropshire Plain, the Severn Valley, Bromlow Callow, Corndon and much further beyond, to Cadair Idris and the mountains towards the coast.

Several of us left the path briefly to explore the recently restored squatters' cottages at Blakemoorgate, a little further on, which were occupied as recently as the 1950s. A small patch of rhubarb is the only remnant of the garden, but information boards and sound recordings in the cow byre suggest that the inhabitants were virtually self-sufficient in fruit and vegetables. A nearby wheatear was an unexpected sight for a couple of members.

The surrounding acid grassland supports an interesting flora as well as birds and colourful fungi, and several members were eager to see the hybrid between Cowberry *Vaccinium vitis-idaea* and Bilberry *Vaccinium myrtillus*, *V.x intermedium*, which Kate Thorne had found nearby in the past. We followed Kate along a good track, looking out for plants with terminal salmon pink flowers and deciduous leaves, but they were not easy to spot, and we were relieved when she brought an example of all three species in order that we could compare them. Although pretty confident that one of these was the hybrid, it is easier to identify in the summer, and so another outing at flowering time might confirm it more conclusively. Martin Beaton also pointed out that the stem of the hybrid we found did not have an angled stem, which Bilberry has and Cowberry does not.

The other botanical highlight was the rare Scottish Laburnum, *Laburnum alpinum*, growing nearby. As Kate explained, *Laburnum alpinum* has a wing along the top of the fruit, (although unfortunately there was no fruit to be found on this occasion) whereas the ordinary Laburnum, *Laburnum anagyroides* has a narrow thick ridge along the top of the fruit. The two hybridise, but the specimen that Kate pointed out has been confirmed as *L. alpinum* by a BSBI referee.

Heading back to base along the footpath above Crowsnest Dingle, a deep steep-sided valley, we were mesmerised by hundreds of hirundines, mainly house martins but with a scattering of swallows, which had gathered to feed, and wheeled around in seemingly ever-increasing numbers beneath us. A truly breathtaking sight, which will live long in the memory, as well as a reminder of the imminent lengthy migration for which these birds were preparing.

An excellent tea at The Stiperstones Inn rounded the day off perfectly, and it was heartening to hear that all who had opted for the longer walk were delighted to have made the effort, and thrilled to have completed it.

Report by Sue and Steve Southam